

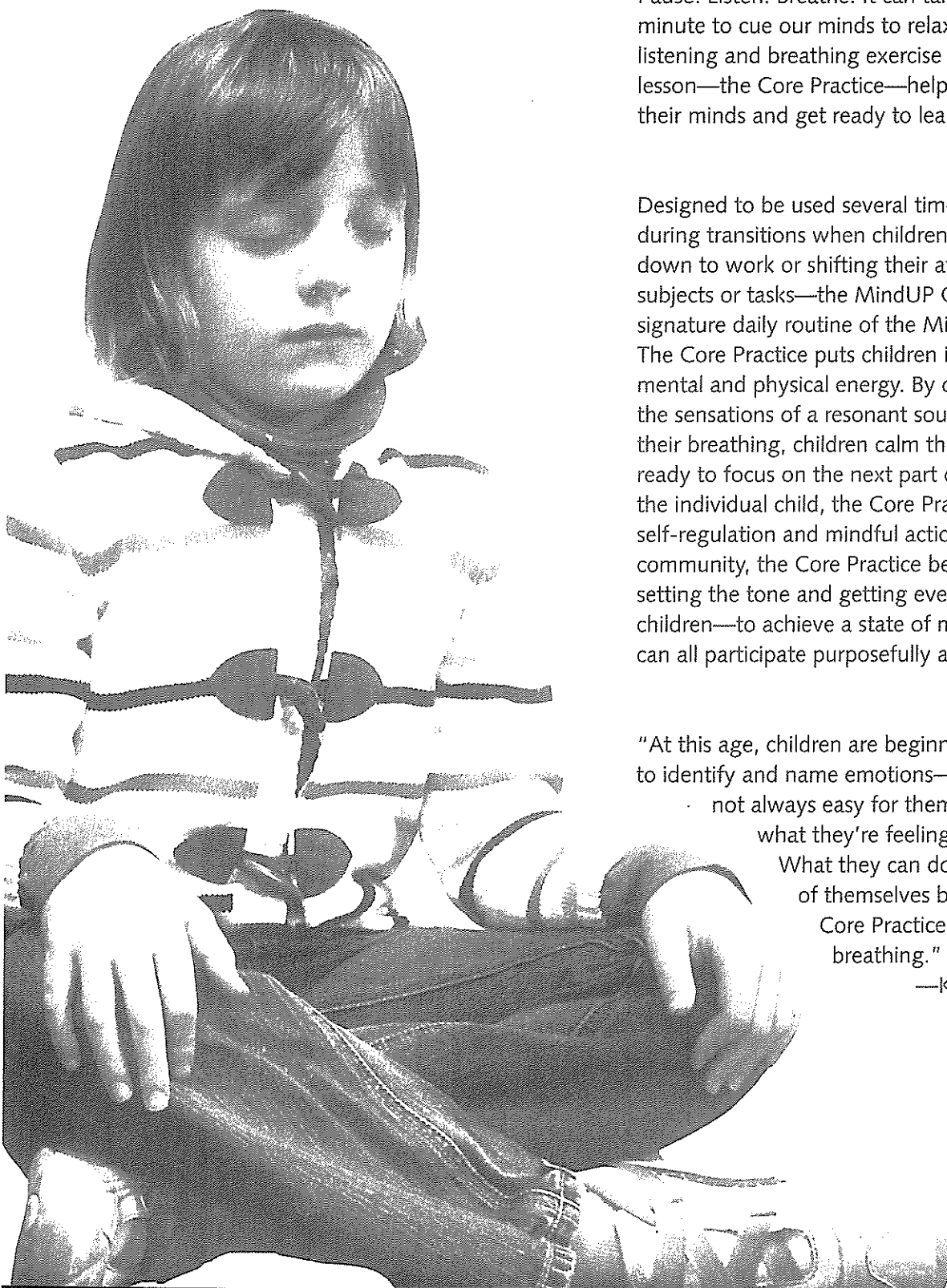
Focused Awareness: The Core Practice

Pause. Listen. Breathe. It can take less than a minute to cue our minds to relax and focus. A short listening and breathing exercise introduced in this lesson—the Core Practice—helps children quiet their minds and get ready to learn.

Designed to be used several times a day—especially during transitions when children need help settling down to work or shifting their attention between subjects or tasks—the MindUP Core Practice is the signature daily routine of the MindUP program. The Core Practice puts children in control of their mental and physical energy. By concentrating on the sensations of a resonant sound and then of their breathing, children calm their minds and get ready to focus on the next part of their day. For the individual child, the Core Practice supports self-regulation and mindful action. For the class community, the Core Practice becomes a time for setting the tone and getting everyone—teacher and children—to achieve a state of mind in which they can all participate purposefully and thoughtfully.

“At this age, children are beginning to be able to identify and name emotions—however, it's not always easy for them to articulate what they're feeling in the moment. What they can do is regain control of themselves by using the Core Practice of listening and breathing.”

—Kindergarten teacher



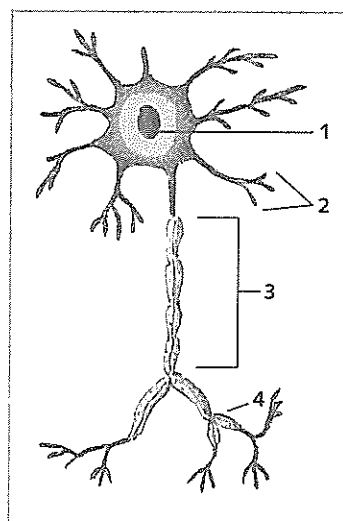
Linking to Brain Research

Controlling Our Breathing

Focusing on breathing helps calm the body by slowing heart rate, lowering blood pressure, and sharpening focus. Paying attention to breathing also supports strong functioning in the higher brain. Controlled breathing lessens anxiety by overriding the “fight, flight, or freeze” response set off by the amygdala and gives control to conscious thought, which takes place in the prefrontal cortex. When breathing is deliberately regulated, the brain is primed to think first and then plan a response, enabling mindful behavior.

Teaching children to focus on and control their breathing can help them become less reactive and more reflective when feeling anxious or stressed. The short daily activity of listening and breathing (Core Practice) introduced in this lesson capitalizes on neuroplasticity, the brain process that creates and strengthens nerve cell (neuron) connections through practice or repeated experience. One example of this growth occurs on the receiving end of the neurons involved in repeated thoughts and actions; branch-like receptors called dendrites increase in number and size, enabling a more efficient passage of information along frequently used neural pathways. This is one of many ways in which the structure of the brain is flexible and ready to grow.

As children practice controlled breathing, their brains develop and reinforce the “habit” of responding to anxiety by focusing on breathing. This leads to reflective rather than reactive responses. The more controlled breathing is practiced, the more self-managed and mindful children can become.



Nerve cells, or neurons, carry messages through electrochemical impulses or signals. The cell body (soma) [1] houses the neuron's control center (nucleus). Dendrites [2] receive information from other neurons. The axon [3] relays the signal from the dendrites to [4] the nerve endings, which transmit the information to other neurons.

Clarify for the Class

Have children use their hand and forearm to show the parts of a neuron: The palm is the nucleus, the fingers are dendrites, the forearm is the axon, and the elbow (with two or three sticky flags attached) is the nerve ending. Show how the information moves from the dendrites through the axon and gets sent along to another neuron's dendrites (children can link up fingers to elbows to create an information path).

Discuss: Can you show in your model which part of our brain cells grow when we practice something? What do you think will happen to the neurons in charge of helping us focus when we practice mindful breathing?

Getting Ready



Resonant Sound!

Striking a gentle but resonant instrument creates the opening and closing note of the Core Practice.

GOALS

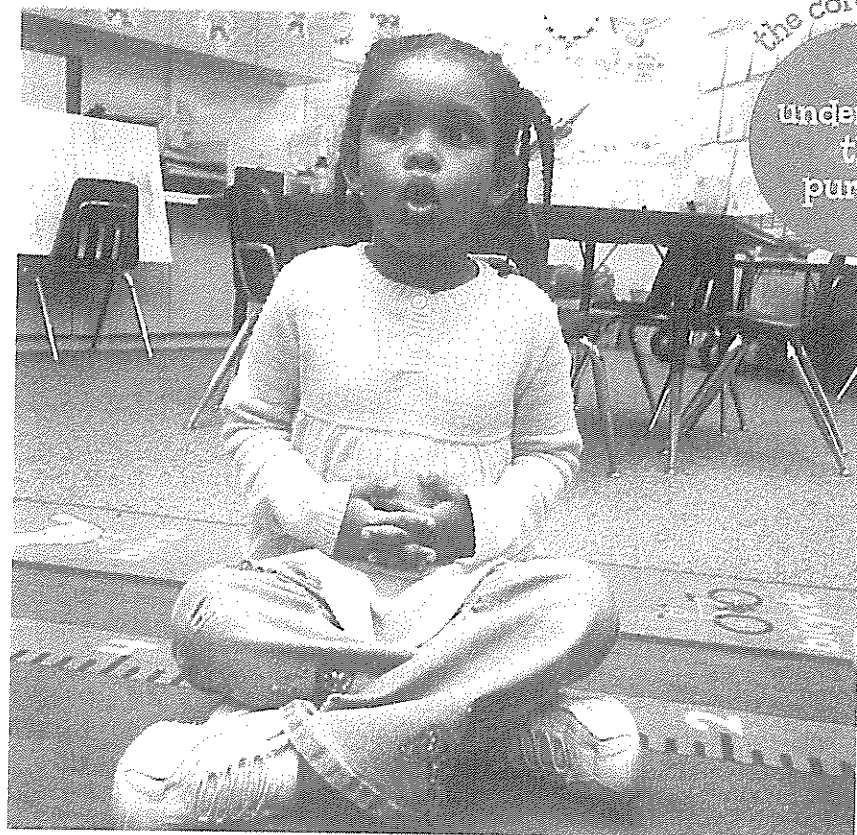
- Children learn an exercise that combines listening and breathing to calm and focus their minds.
- Children discover the importance of practicing focusing exercises regularly.

MATERIALS

- chart paper
- instrument that resonates with a clear, distinctive tone for 10–20 seconds (e.g., triangle, xylophone, chimes, piano, bell, a violin)

CREATING THE OPTIMISTIC CLASSROOM

Classroom Management As children regularly exercise control of their breathing, a new “brain habit”—one that automatically reacts to anxiety by taking control of breathing—becomes the default pathway leading to reflective rather than reactive responses. The more controlled breathing is practiced, the more self-managed and mindful children can become. The one-minute Core Practice is done three times daily, establishing scheduled opportunities for children to focus and regulate themselves throughout the day.



the core practice
understand
the
purpose

Deep Belly Breath
A child feels her lungs expand and contract as she breathes deeply.

MINDUP Warm-Up

Focusing on Breathing Practice

Remind children of the mindful exercise they practiced in Lesson 2 when they listened for all the sounds around them. Explain that now they'll be doing another exercise. They'll learn to breathe in a way that helps their brain think more clearly. Modify the following script to guide children through a simple breathing exercise:

- *Sit down in a comfortable position. Close your eyes or look down at your hands.*
- *Pay attention to your breathing.*
- *Take calm, slow breaths. Gently breathe in through your nose, then let go of each breath.*
- *Keep your shoulders relaxed. Picture the air coming into your body and going out again.*
- *If your mind tries to think about other things, bring your attention back to your breath.*
- *Feel your stomach rising and falling. Keep your belly soft and relaxed.*
- *Open your eyes slowly and take another slow, deep breath with your eyes open.*

Discuss: How did you feel as you breathed in and out? What did you notice about your breathing? How did you keep your mind focused on your breathing?

Leading the Lesson

Introduction: The Core Practice

Preparation

Show children the instrument you will be using for the Core Practice. Play a note to show how it works. Encourage children to talk about the sound; for example, to describe the sound and identify other objects or actions that have a similar sound. If you have the time, allow each child to strike a note.

Explain the combined exercise. Children will be sitting cross-legged on the floor, resting their hands naturally in their laps or palms up on their knees; closing their eyes or looking down at their hands.

Ask children to prepare themselves by: sitting cross-legged in a circle on the floor; resting their hands naturally in their laps or palms up on their knees; closing their eyes or looking down at their hands.

Before you play the sound, tell children to try to focus only on it until they can no longer hear it; when the sound has faded completely, they may open their eyes. Ask: Was it difficult to keep listening? How did you stay focused on listening? Repeat the exercise. Ask children to be aware of their body. Were your shoulders relaxed? Are your hands still?

Practice

Once children have practiced this exercise with the same resonant sound several times, their brains will begin to connect the sound with paying closer attention and being mindful of the moment. This resonant sound will become a signal for beginning and ending the Core Practices, so it is essential that you use the same resonant instrument consistently.

Practice

Prepare children for combining mindful listening with mindful breathing to begin the Core Practice.

Explain the combined exercise.

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Make sure that children understand the directions. Then play a note from the instrument. Pause for at ten seconds after the sound has stopped, for mindful breathing. Play the note a second time, and observe children open their eyes.

Sitting cross-legged on the floor with the head "floating" above the shoulders encourages good posture, breathing, and circulation, which in turn support an alert mind.

Children who are uncomfortable closing their eyes can simply look down at their hands. The most important thing is to avoid visual distractions, especially eye contact, during the exercise.

From the Research

Neuroimaging studies have revealed that students' comfort level has critical impact on information transmission and storage in the brain. (Ashby, 1999)

Reflect

Encourage children to share their experiences with the Core Practice. Tie in the parts of the brain.

- ♦ What do you think was happening in your brain during the Core Practice exercise? What do you think each part of your brain was doing?

Explain that although this exercise may feel awkward at first, their brain will get better at it with practice.

You might point out some challenges you have had during Core Practice, such as keeping your attention focused on your breathing, focusing your listening exclusively on the sound of the instrument, and/or staying still.

Announce the times during the day that children will practice their new listening and breathing skills. Encourage children to try controlled breathing on their own, as well—especially when they are feeling nervous, angry, or afraid.

- ♦ We'll do the Core Practice long if or short times every day, but it should be your own idea. It will help you think and make good decisions.

When children do the exercise in a mindful, focused way, they establish a precedent that they can follow. Assure children who have trouble staying focused that keeping their concentration on the sound and on their breathing simply takes practice.

Keep a consistent schedule for leading the Core Practice three times a day, ensuring that children are seated and silent before you begin.



MINDUP In the Real World

Career Connection

Listen, aim, focus, breathe, shoot. We can see that the Core Practice helps us every day no matter what we're doing. One profession that really depends on mindful breathing and listening is that of the wildlife photographer. We owe our most spectacular wildlife photography to the mindful steps the photographer follows before each shot. Sometimes enduring months in remote, challenging environments stalking an elusive animal like the snow leopard, the photographer must listen intently to know when the animal is near and breathe mindfully to assure a steady hand and an in-focus photograph snapped at exactly the right moment.

Discuss: Have you ever done a task for which you had to be very still and center all your attention on what you were doing? What was it? What are some other tasks that might require you to focus like that?

Once a Day

Do one minute of mindful breathing or listen to a piece of calming music just prior to a task or part of your day that demands your full concentration and focus.

MINDUP

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Information for the teachers of students with high levels of anxiety.

re Generalized Anxiety Disorder.

"Children with generalized anxiety disorder worry excessively about all manner of upcoming events and occurrences. They worry unduly about their academic performance or sporting activities, about being on time, or even about natural disasters such as earthquakes. The worry persists even when a child is not being judged and has always performed well in the past. Because of their anxiety, children may be over-conforming, perfectionist or unsure of themselves. They tend to redo tasks if there are any imperfections. They tend to seek approval and need constant reassurance about their performance and their anxieties." (DSM-IV)

Interventions for worry.

Accommodations:

- ☐ Model appropriate behaviour for the student in anxiety provoking situations. (if/when this happens ...do this...)
- ☐ Diminish stress within school situations.
- ☐ Forewarn student of transitions and have "tasks" for the student to focus on during transitions.(e.g. hand out worksheets)
- ☐ Address student about their fear individually, outside of class if possible, helping them to generate solutions to utilize when they are feeling overwhelmed.
- ☐ Identify alternatives to avoid unnecessary exposure to anxiety-provoking stimuli. e.g. place students into their work group and allocate roles.
- ☐ Have the student examine how they have handled similar situations in the past, so that progress can be seen and successful strategies can be incorporated.

Modifications:

- ☐ Embed desirable, familiar or safe content in instruction.
- ☐ Utilise literature that addresses the student's fears/exemplifies coping strategies.

Specialized instruction:

- ☐ Have the student employ specific problem solving steps:
identify the problem- generate alternatives- predict consequences- choose solution.
- ☐ Devise a desensitization approach. Start with a safe activity + small challenge.
- ☐ Provide group, interactive bibliotherapy activities that address fears or topics worrisome to the student (e.g. novels such as "Worrywarts" or "Cannily, Cannily.") Discuss how the character in the book copes.
- ☐ Use visuals to help pace the student when he/she is anxious about a particular thing. e.g. moving a symbol along a timeline to indicate how long until the end.
- ☐ Have the student practice positive self talk.
- ☐ Help the student evaluate the evidence for his/her negative conclusions.
- ☐ Challenge the student's negative conclusions.
- ☐ Help the student identify automatic negative thoughts.
- ☐ Help the student examine other perspectives.
- ☐ Provide the student with competing responses to negative thoughts or behaviour.

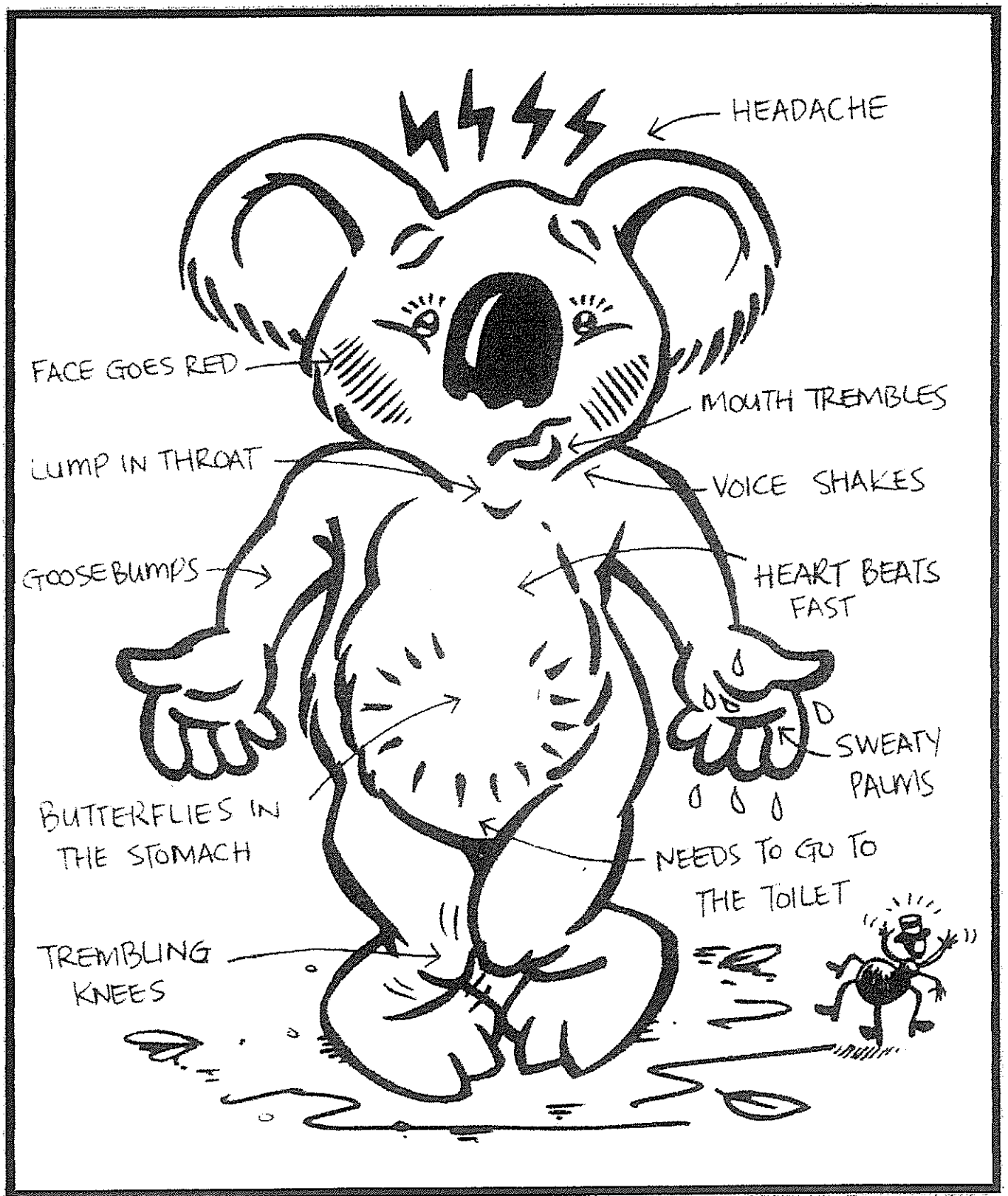
Behavioural planning:

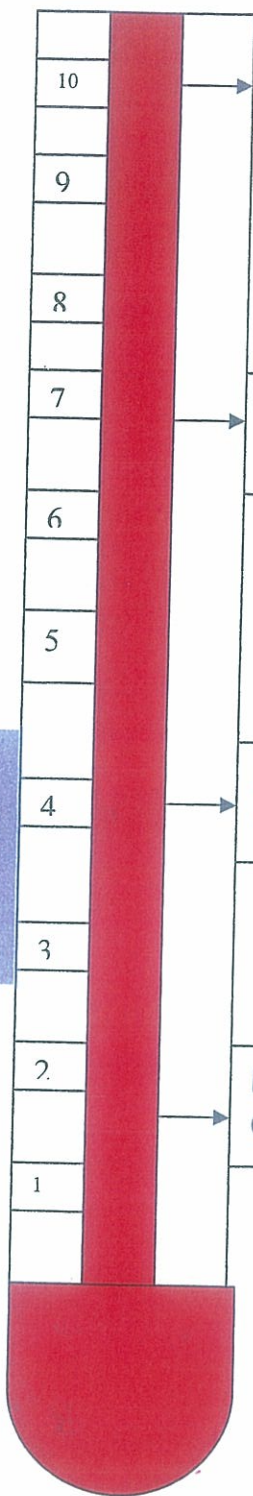
Develop a consistent de-escalation procedure that is familiar to all staff. Eg. *When worried the student will:*

1. *Take 10 deep breaths*
2. *Identify how a preferred "hero" would handle the situation*
3. *Access school counselor or mentor teacher*
4. *Do alternative /less stressful work*
5. *Read for five minutes in designated area then return to task*

For more detail & examples, visit

http://www.massgeneral.org/schoolpsychiatry/inter_anxiety_worry.asp





The Worryometer

Thinking It Through:

- ☐ What are the facts?
- ☐ What has happened in the past?
- ☐ What else could happen?
- ☐ What would I tell a friend to do, if it happened to them?
- ☐ What will probably happen this time?

What to Think Now:

What to Do:

- ☐ Do something fun: computer, read, draw, play a game.
- ☐ 3 deep breaths: in & out
- ☐ Go somewhere quiet
- ☐ Find an adult: tell them how you feel
- ☐ Do some relaxation activities

The Event:

My Worry:

Tricky Situations Sheet



What Happened:

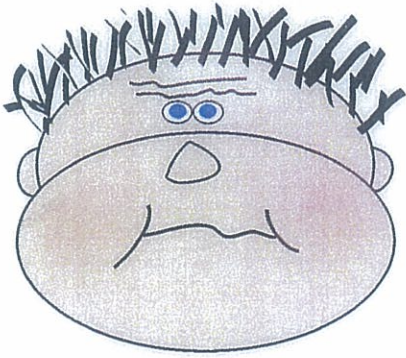
What I thought & felt:

What I said & did:



What I will do next time:

How others could help me next time:



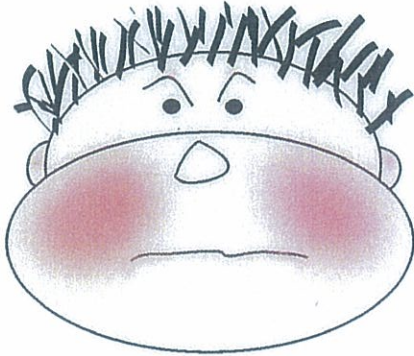
Frustrated



Embarrassed



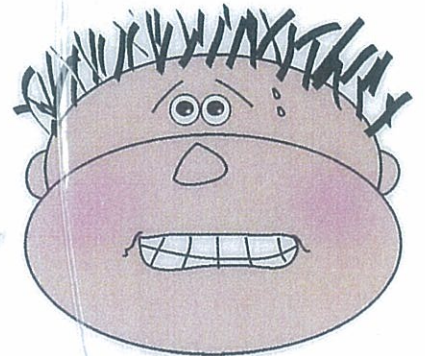
Sad



Mad



Scared



Nervous



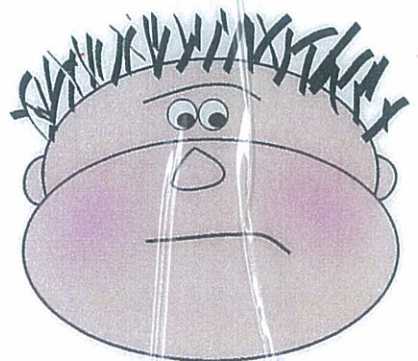
Happy



Loved

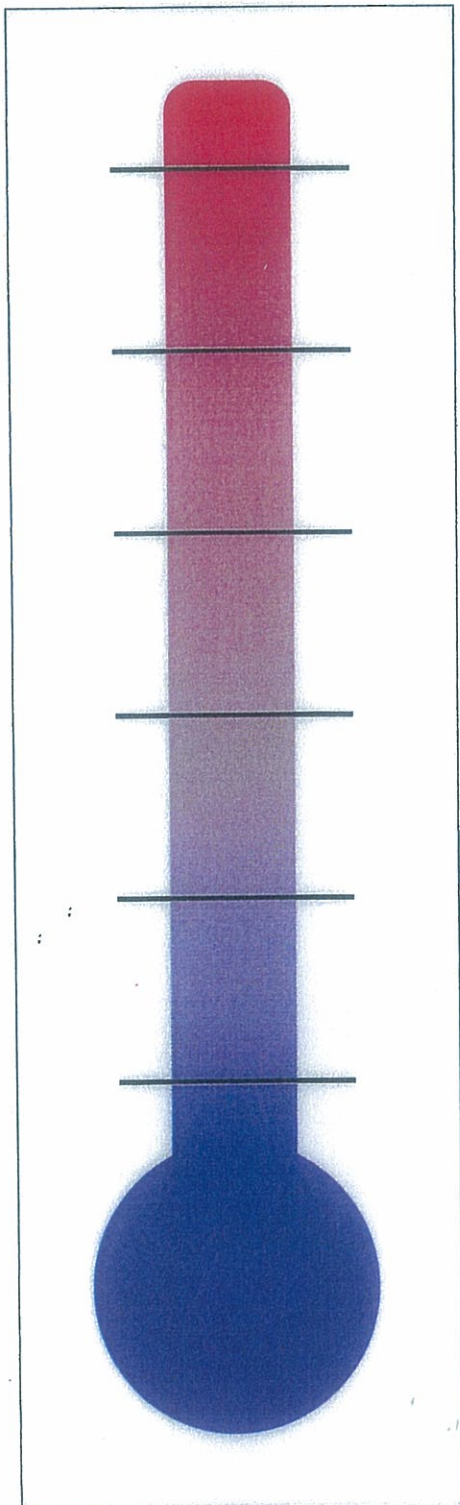


Proud



Lonely

Relaxation Thermometer



Mad

Take 3
deep breaths
1...2...3



Relaxed

My Ladder to Success



My Goal:

Step 10:

Step 9:

Step 8:

Step 7:

Step 6:

Step 5:

Step 4:

Step 3:

Step 2:

Step 1:

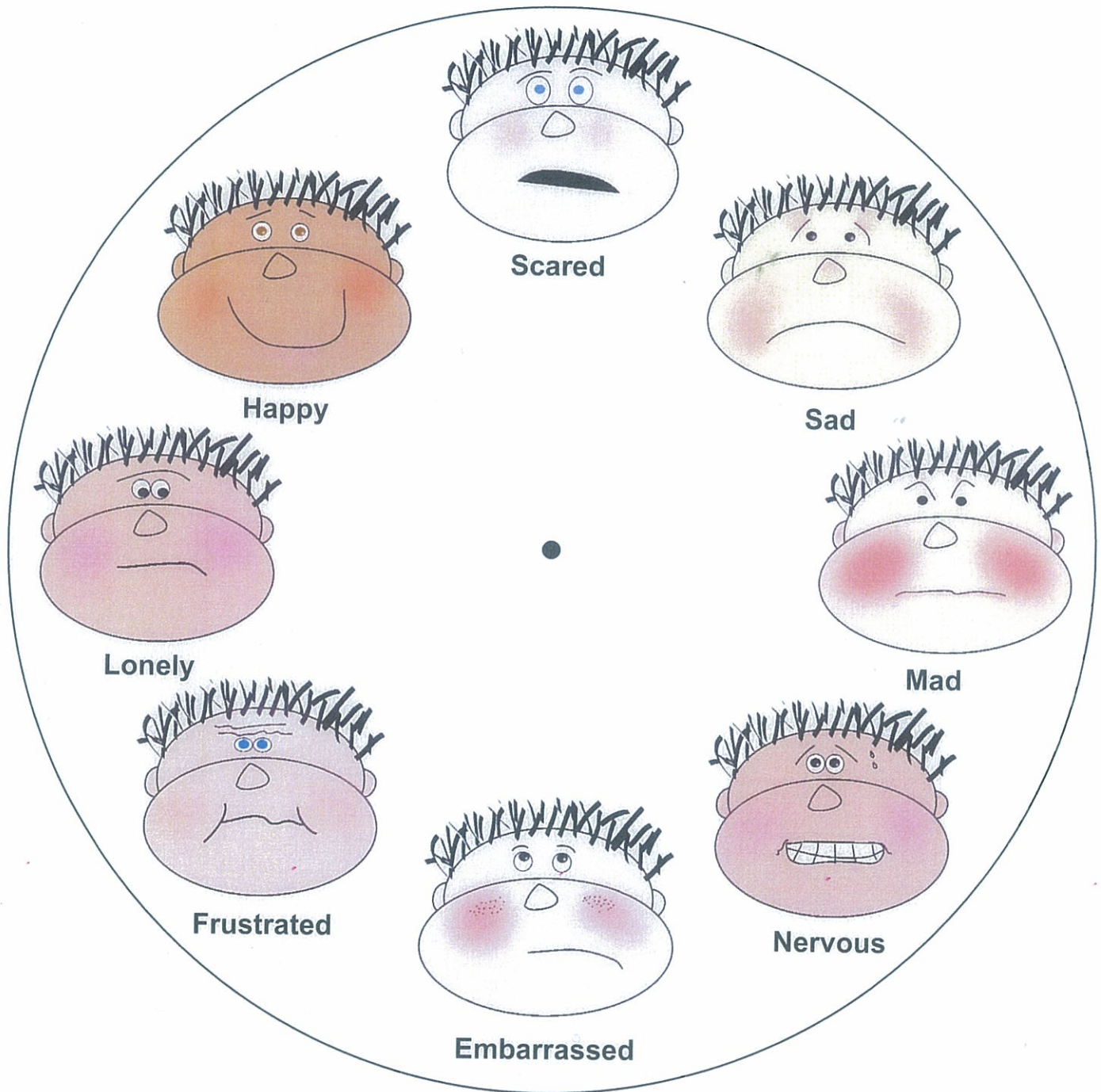
Rewards:

Steps 1 – 4: _____

Steps 5 – 8: _____

Steps 9 – 10: _____

Feeling Wheel



Tricky Situations Sheet



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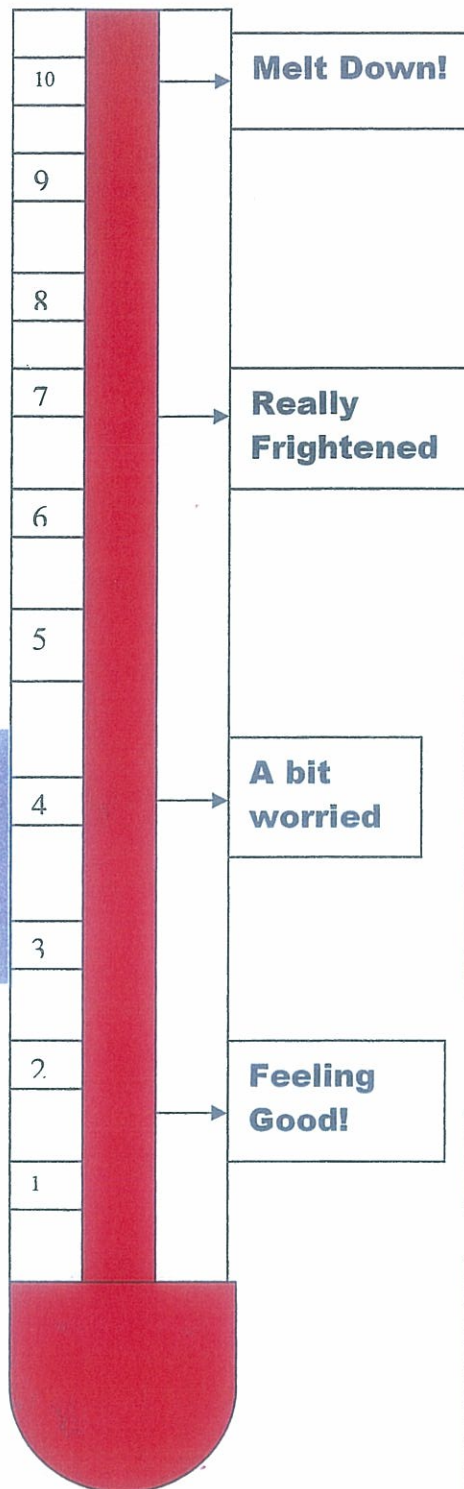
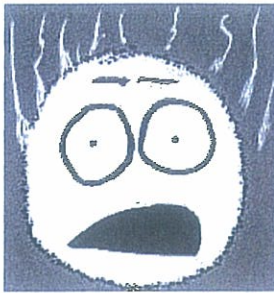
What I thought & felt:

What I said & did:



What I will do next time:

How others could help me next time:



The Worrymeter

The Event:

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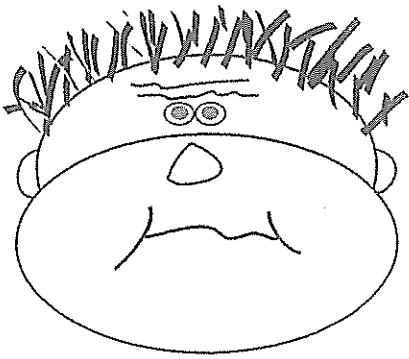
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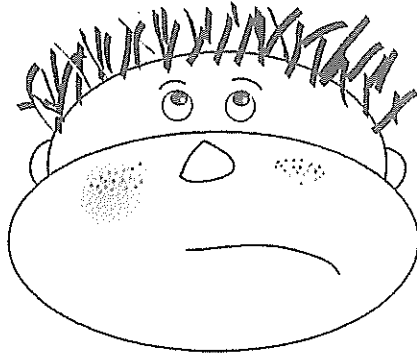
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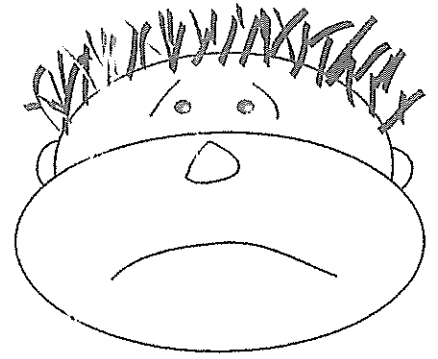
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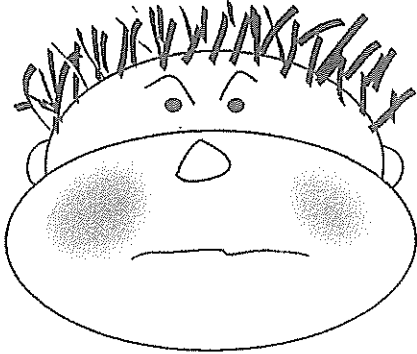
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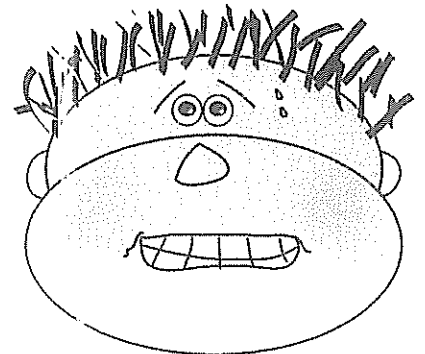
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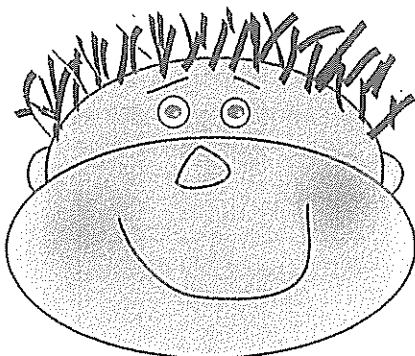
Mad



Scared



Nervous



Happy



Loved

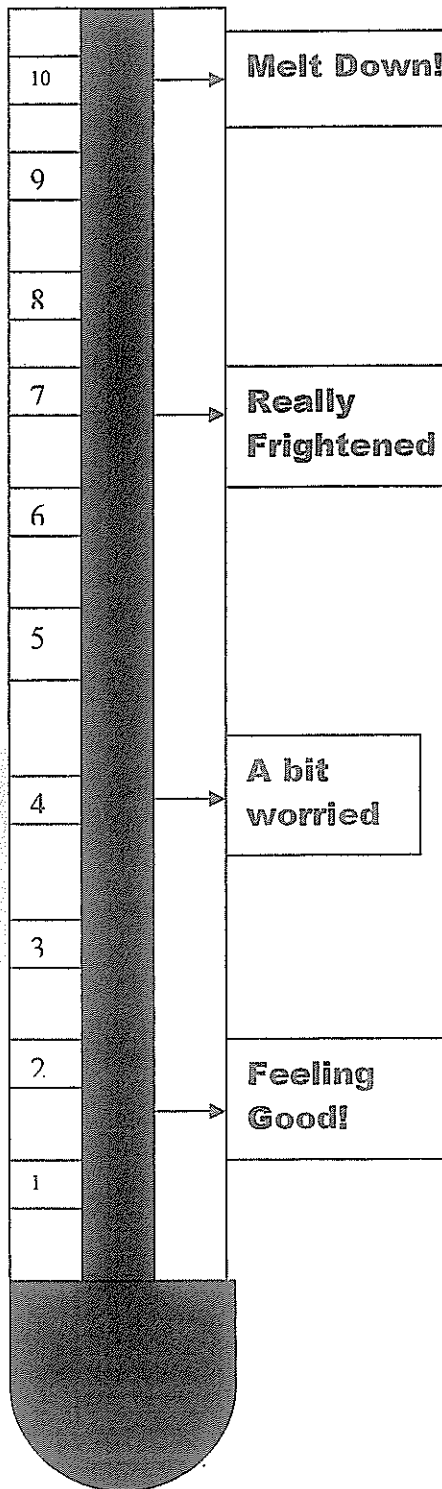
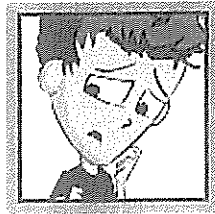
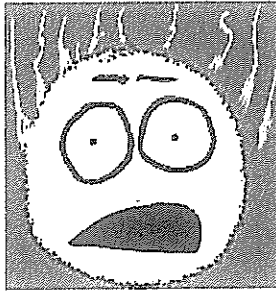


Proud



Lonely

B
T



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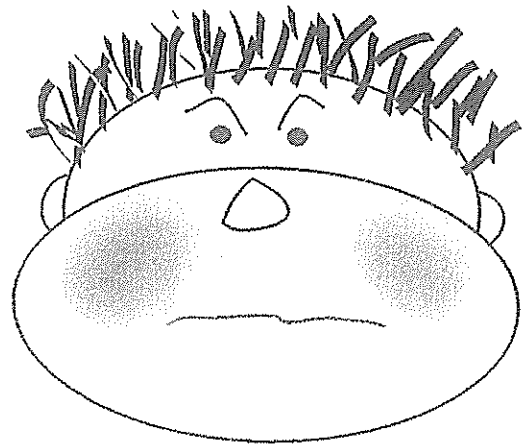
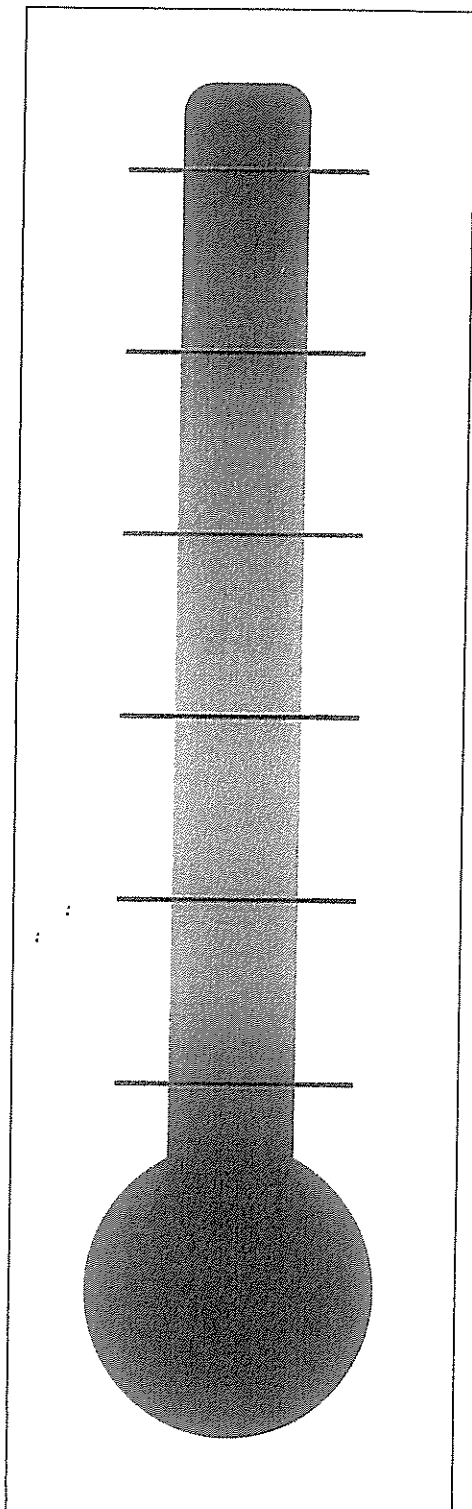
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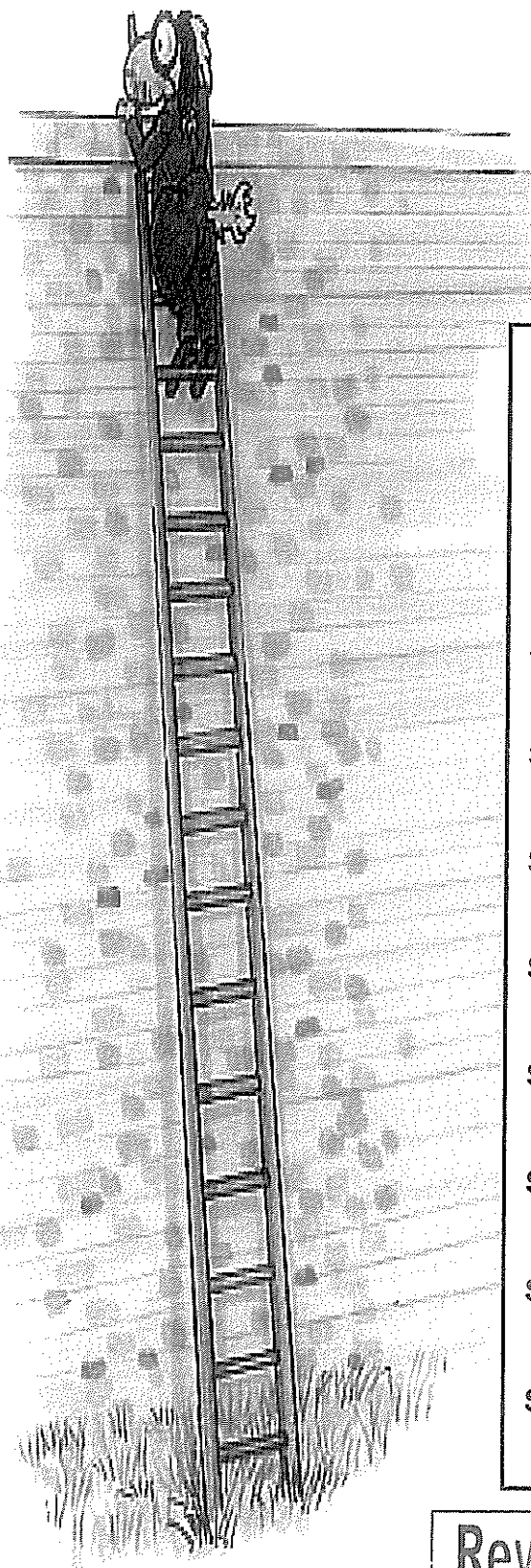
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1...2...3



Relaxed

My Ladder to Success



My goal:

Step 10:

Step 9:

Step 8:

Step 7:

Step 6:

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Step 4:

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Step 2:

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Rewards:

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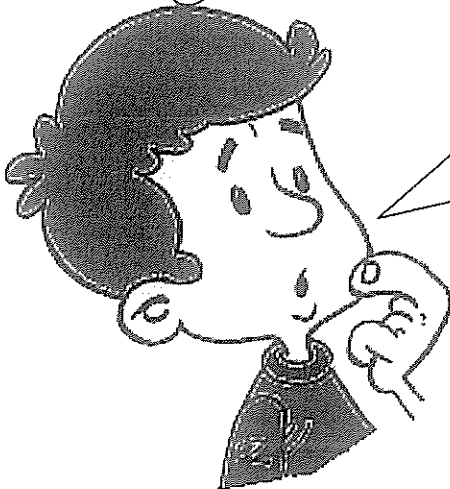
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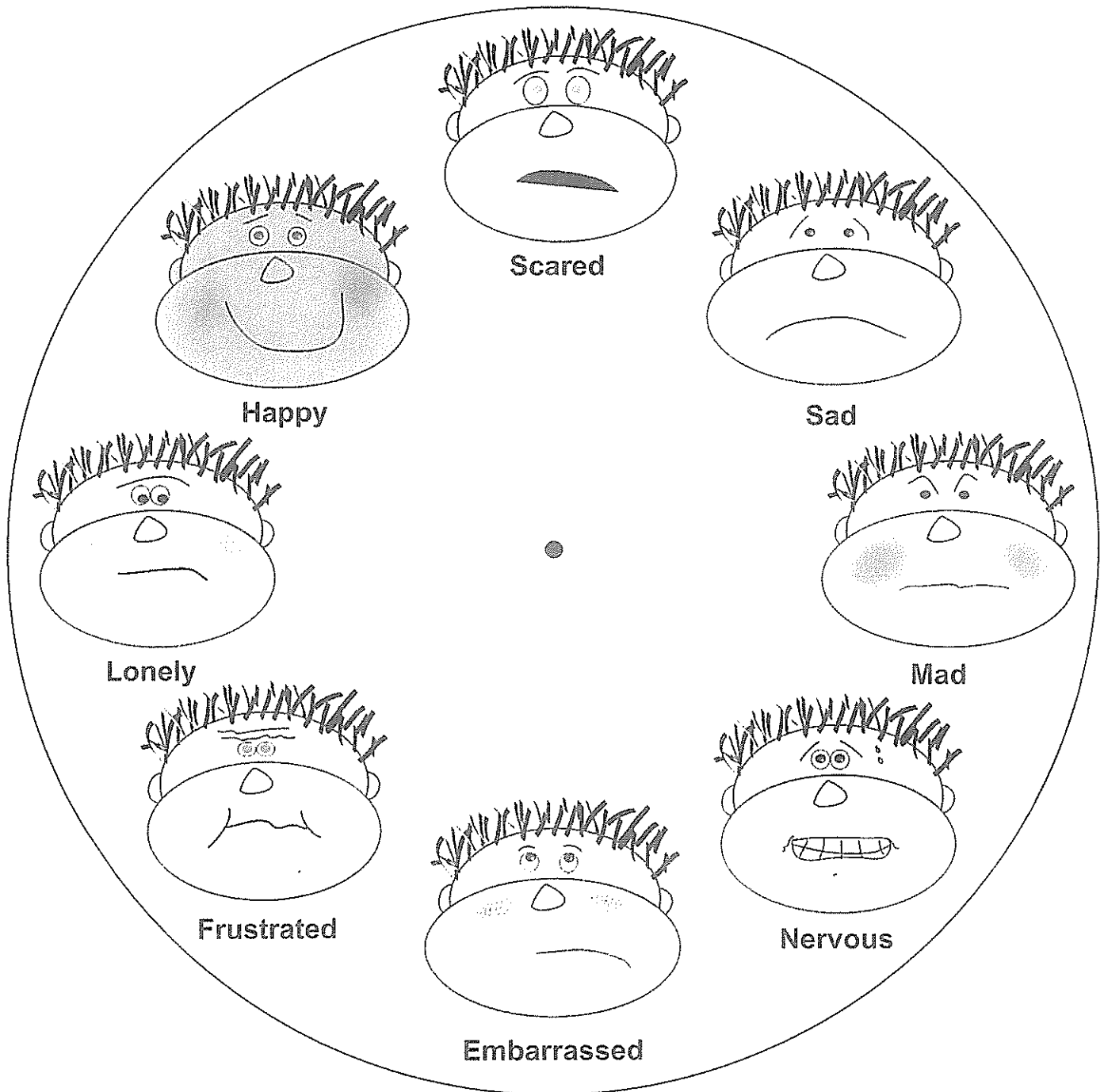
What I said & did:



What I will do next time:

How others could help me next time:

Feeling Wheel



When things go wrong for you,
you can **Bounce Back**
and be yourself again...



Bad feelings always go away again.

Other people can help you feel better if
you talk to them.

Unhelpful thinking makes you feel more
upset. Think again.

Nobody is perfect. Mistakes help you learn.

Concentrate on the good things and have
a laugh.

Everybody feels sad and worried
sometimes, not just you.

